Chapter 6

Program Intensity and Participant Attendance

The local evaluator monitors the systematic collection of participation data and provides analyses useful in both interpreting participant outcomes and guiding the continuous improvement of program services. This chapter covers:

- key evaluation questions related to participation;
- participation variables;
- managing and analyzing data; and
- using participation data.

Participation data document the number of hours of services offered in the four core instructional components (program intensity) and the number of hours that participants attended those services (participant attendance). These data help determine whether projects are offering enough instructional hours and services to ensure that participants can achieve their goals, and whether families are participating at a level such that they can achieve their goals.

Instructional opportunities and participation affect participant outcomes directly. Participation data are particularly relevant given the nature of Even Start programs and the populations served—i.e., the "most in need" families, who frequently face problems that compromise their ability to participate in program services regularly (e.g., work pressures, substance abuse, lack of housing, etc.). Keeping accurate attendance records and monitoring family participation patterns can be difficult because Even Start families tend to enter and exit programs throughout the project year. Ensuring that projects offer enough instructional hours in the four core components has historically proved challenging for project staff. For these and other reasons, participation data are considered critical for local evaluations and constitute an essential element in the *Framework for Planning Local Evaluations*.

Key Evaluation Questions Related to Participation

The local evaluation documents the extent to which projects offer services at the level of intensity participants need to achieve their program goals. Key questions are:

- *Do projects offer enough hours of service for participants to achieve outcomes?*
- *Are program services of sufficient duration for participants to achieve outcomes?*

Answering questions about program intensity is just one aspect of participation data. The next set of evaluation questions looks at attendance patterns, or participation in the services offered:

- *Are participants attending enough hours of service to realize outcomes?*
- *Are participants staying in programs long enough to achieve their goals?*

"Participant attendance" reflects the actual number of hours that individuals participated in program services and the length of time the family actively participated in the program.

Analyzing participation data can also support efforts to improve program services. Key evaluation questions that can inform continuous program improvement include:

- *How are families meeting the project's participation expectations and attendance policies across the four core instructional components?*
- *Do participation patterns differ by program component?*
- *Is the project recruiting families who are committed to program participation and likely to remain in the program long enough to achieve their goals?*

Participation data provide evidence of participants' 1) satisfaction with program services, 2) understanding and compliance with project participation policies, and 3) commitment to participating in a family literacy program. Data documenting participation patterns and attendance rates that fall below project expectations may spur staff to gather additional data on program quality, the accessibility and scheduling of services, the recruitment of appropriate families, staffing concerns, and so forth.

Linking program intensity and participant outcomes. The premise of Even Start family literacy is that families "most in need" will participate in a family literacy program at a level of intensity that will enable adults to improve their literacy skills, become partners in their children's education, and ensure that children will be prepared for success in school and life experiences. Findings from the second national evaluation study of Even Start family literacy programs identified family participation as an important variable in achieving participant outcomes. The conclusion that "the intensity of program services and the duration of program participation are correlated with participant achievement" led to an amendment of federal Even Start legislation and the definition of the term "family literacy services." This definition directs Even Start programs to provide services at the level of intensity needed to ensure that families can meet their program goals.

Partial Definition of Family Literacy Services (Section 9101 (20) of the ESEA)

"…services provided to participants on a voluntary basis that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and of sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family…"

Increased program intensity leads to increased participant attendance. The second and third national evaluations of Even Start programs examined the relationships among program intensity, attendance, and achievement of participant outcomes. Evidence that families who participated in high-quality intensive instructional programs were more likely to achieve their goals led to recommendations for minimum intensity levels in the required core instructional components of adult literacy/education, parenting education, early childhood education, and parent/child interactive literacy activities. The recommendations are based on the number of instructional hours offered by the Even Start projects which had the highest program intensity levels in the third national Even Start evaluation. The Department recommends a minimum number of instructional hours for Even Start programs (see right).

Recommended Minimum Number of Instructional Hours to be Provided Monthly
- *60 hours of adult education*
- *65 hours of preschool early childhood education*
- *60 hours of infant/toddler early childhood education*
- *20 hours of parenting education (includes interactive literacy activities)*

Linking family attendance rates and participant outcomes. Findings from the third national evaluation study revealed that "families in the program do not take full advantage of the services offered by Even Start projects; they participate in a small amount of instruction relative to their needs and program goals." Analyses of Even Start family participation patterns (2000-2001) showed that, on average, families received instructional services for approximately seven months and attended fewer than half of the instructional hours offered in the four components. These findings suggest that Even Start programs need to be more active in developing strategies to increase participant attendance and encourage families to remain in programs for longer periods of time. In 2000, the Even Start statute added Attendance and Retention as a required program element.

Evaluations of Even Start programs can support program efforts to address the required program element of Attendance and Retention by 1) designing and monitoring systems to collect participation data, 2) determining the effectiveness of strategies to enhance participation, and 3) providing projects with ongoing analyses of family participation patterns.

Participation Variables

Four participation variables can be calculated to construct the most complete picture of participation data. They are:
Program Intensity. The number of instructional hours offered in each component during the project year;
Participant Attendance. The number of hours a participant attended the services offered in each component;
Attendance Rate. A percentage based on the number of hours the participant attended out of the number of hours possible for the participant to attend.
Duration or Length of Enrollment. The length of time that a participant remained an active participant in the program.

Determining activities to be included in participation calculations. Even Start projects offer a variety of services and classes within the four core instructional components. An important first step is to identify those instructional activities that should be counted in participation calculations. For example, parent participation in a substance abuse counseling group should be counted as support service hours offered by the program, but would not be included in the participation calculations for parent education

Attendance and Retention
Each Even Start project must "encourage participating families to attend regularly and to remain in the program a sufficient time to meet their program goals" (Section 1235(11) of the ESEA). Each program determines what is reasonable attendance for a family in order to achieve its educational goals and to remain active participants in the program. If a family is not attending regularly, the project needs to work with family members to determine what they need in order to participate actively. If such attempts still fail, the project should transition the family out of Even Start, perhaps to a more suitable program, and recruit a more committed family.

because substance abuse counseling is not considered an instructional service. Parent education activities that should be counted in the participation calculation are those that have an instructional/literacy focus (e.g., child development, literacy development). Project directors and evaluators should review state guidelines (if provided) and work together to determine the specific instructional activities that should be included in participation calculations for Even Start.

Program intensity. Program intensity represents the total number of instructional hours offered during the project year. Program intensity hours are calculated for the four core components, including all program services identified as appropriate for instruction (e.g., center-based classes, individual tutorials, home-based programs).

Program intensity data demonstrate whether projects are offering services of sufficient intensity to help families achieve their goals. Instructional activities may be provided by Even Start or by collaborating agencies. Because the number of hours offered each week can vary and programs close for school holidays, staff development days, etc., project staff should document the actual number of instructional hours offered rather than estimates of hours based on weekly schedules (e.g., GED classes are offered three times a week). To determine program intensity accurately, project staff must carefully maintain records and document the number of instructional hours offered weekly.

Calculating program intensity. Calculating program intensity simply consists of adding the total number of instructional hours offered over the course of the project year. Program intensity is the

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Example: Activities Counted as Parent/Child Interactive Literacy Activities

Interactive Literacy Activities have an instructional/literacy focus, involve both the parent and the child, and are supervised or structured by Even Start staff or teachers, such as:

- *Parents reading books with their children and*
- *Field trips designed for parents and children to learn together.*

Activities that should not be counted as Interactive Literacy Activities instruction include:

- *activities that do not engage both parent and child,*
- *home-based activities that are not supervised or structured by program staff (e.g., parent reads to child at home but does not engage in debriefing or follow-up activity on reading experience, parent watches TV with child but does not participate in a structured follow-up activity), or*
- *free-play outdoor activities that do not have an educational focus.*

(Excerpt from California recommendations to local projects)

number of hours of instruction that the average participant could receive or the number of hours that programs expect participants to receive if they attended 100% of the time and were enrolled for the entire project year.

Example: Calculating Program Intensity [3]
Early Childhood Education: Preschool-age children attend preschool for four hours a day for 180 days during the school year and also receive 60 hours of ECE during an Even Start summer enrichment program. Children enrolled in K-2 may participate in after-school supplemental tutoring programs (2 hrs/day for 80 days), attend Even Start during their off-track sessions (3 hrs/day for 32 days), and participate in a one-month Even Start summer enrichment program (60 ECE hours).

Program Intensity Calculations for Child Education
Preschool: (4 hrs. X 180 days) + 60 summer hours = 780 hours/year
K-2 Children:(2 hrs. X 80 days) + (3 hrs. X 32 days) + 60 summer hours = 316 hours/year

Comparing Program Intensity Totals to Recommended Hours
Preschool Education: 780 hours/year or an average or 65 hours/month (meets recommendation)

Participant attendance and attendance rate. Participant attendance data include 1) the actual number of hours attended and 2) the percentage of hours attended based on participants' possible hours (or attendance rate). Analyses of a participant's attendance and attendance rate provide the most complete picture of an individual's participation pattern. Attendance rates take into account differences in participants' enrollment dates, absences due to excused leaves from the program (e.g., pregnancy, illness), and individual participation plans to accommodate family needs and work responsibilities. These data are useful for identifying both participants who are attending at sufficient levels of intensity to achieve their goals and participants who may need additional support or motivation to improve their attendance.

Many projects communicate established participation expectations or attendance rates to families as part of the program requirements. For example, a program may specify that families are expected to participate in 75% of the hours offered in each of the four core instructional components. In addition to documenting actual hours of attendance, analyses of attendance rates allow staff to monitor family participation by component.

Participant attendance reflects the actual number of hours that individuals attended classes or participated in program services. Attendance information should be easily obtained from class attendance records; however, projects do not always maintain attendance records with the completeness and accuracy desired for Even Start program evaluations. Because incomplete or inaccurate data are useless for decision-making, and ultimately waste project resources and time,

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[3] Considerations in Calculating Program Intensity for Adult Education. Adult Schools of Education usually offer many classes in a subject—an Adult School may offer five levels of English as a Second Language classes and offer classes during morning, afternoon, and evening sessions. Even Start participants would be expected to attend the class that meets their literacy needs; the calculation for program intensity should take into account the number of instructional hours offered for that class. The program intensity calculation would not be the sum total of hours offered by all Adult School classes.

project staff members are encouraged to review the suggestions for quality data collection in the next section.

Calculating attendance and attendance rates. Calculating participants' attendance data consists of adding the hours attended over the course of a year. Daily attendance data should be added up monthly and then aggregated over the months that the participant is enrolled in the program during the year. To calculate a participant's attendance rate, divide the attendance hours by the total number of hours that the participant could have attended, as determined by his or her enrollment date. To look at overall participation patterns for a month, quarter, or year, evaluators should compute the median attendance and attendance rates as well as the mean or average attendance and attendance rates. Given the typically wide range in hours attended over the course of a project year, the median number of hours may provide a more accurate measure of actual participation patterns.

Participant Name	ESL Attendance		
	# Hours Attended	*# Hours Possible to Attend*	*Attendance*
A	504	600	84%
B	300	600	50%
C	300	400	75%
D	125	200	63%
E	50	50	100%
Median	300	400	75%

Example: ESL Adult Attendance for Project Year 2002-03
Number of Total ESL Hours Offered by Program = 600 Hours

The data in the preceding table can be used to look at individuals' participation patterns as well as group patterns by type of program service. These data identify individuals who 1) received a sufficient amount of instruction to increase their English language proficiency (see hours attended for participants A through C), and 2) participate regularly and meet the program's expected attendance rate of 75% (see attendance rate for participants A, C, E).

Duration. Family duration data describe the length of time that families remain actively enrolled in the program. Participant duration represents the number of months or years that the family actively participated in program services. Both participant attendance and duration data are important for documenting the intensity of a family's experience with program services.

Example: Attendance Rate Analyses

Mary and John both completed 100 hours of adult education. Mary has been enrolled in Even Start for six months but only attended 50% of the hours that were possible for her to attend; John has been enrolled for three months and has attended 90% of the hours possible for him to attend.

John's attendance rate indicates that he participates regularly and consistently, and is more likely than Mary to achieve his program goals in a timely manner. Further, Mary's attendance rate of 50% is well below the program expectation that participants attend 75% of their possible hours.

Project staff has scheduled a meeting with Mary to review expected participation levels, determine how staff can help her improve her attendance, and communicate that Mary's continued enrollment will depend on her willingness to participate at the expected levels.

Participant duration data are calculated by adding the number of months in a project year (or across project years if the family has been continuously enrolled for more than one year).

Managing and Analyzing Data

Participation data are useful to the extent that the data collected are complete and accurate. As stated above, attendance data should reflect all instructional services provided by the Even Start partnership and other collaborating agencies. It is anticipated that project staff will be responsible for determining the instructional services to be included in participation calculations, collecting attendance data, ensuring that the data are complete and accurate, and perhaps inputting the data into a database. It is recommended that the evaluator:

- work with staff to determine eligible instructional services;
- design a data collection system, including consent forms;
- develop attendance recording forms and provide training on form completion and data entry (if relevant);
- analyze the data; and
- share findings with project staff on an ongoing basis.

Suggested strategies for ensuring the collection of quality participation data include:

- Obtain written consent from participants indicating permission to use their data for program evaluation and progress monitoring purposes.
- Inform all program service providers of the need to collect daily attendance data on participants served.
- Provide forms for collecting attendance data and ensure that all providers of program services are trained in the protocol for completing forms.
- Require staff to submit attendance records weekly or monthly. Designate one staff member as responsible for collecting all attendance records and reviewing data to identify missing or incomplete records.
- Designate one staff member who has received training in data entry as the sole person responsible for entering all attendance data into a database or spreadsheet.
- Designate staff members as responsible for tracking the "number of possible hours" for a participant based on 1) the participant's date of enrollment in or exit from the Even Start program and 2) the participant's status, i.e., active or on leave.
- Work with the evaluator to develop a record-keeping system to track participants' enrollment and exit dates. These records should also document the reasons for each family's exit from the program and show whether the family had achieved their program goals when they left.

Analyzing participation data monthly or quarterly and providing these findings to project staff regularly will improve the project staff's effectiveness in monitoring family participation and targeting areas for program improvement. Analyses of attendance data, i.e., calculating the number of hours attended and number of hours possible to attend, and determining the percentage of hours attended, can be easily done with Excel, Lotus 1-2-3, or a similar spreadsheet program.

Using Participation Data

As stated throughout this chapter, participation data are a critical source of information for interpreting participant outcomes and guiding improvement of Even Start program services. The items below summarize how to use participation data for continuous improvement and demonstrating program effectiveness.

- **Sufficient program intensity.** Program intensity data can determine whether instructional offerings are aligned with recommended intensity levels for the core instructional components and if participants have sufficient instructional opportunities to achieve their program goals.

- **Sufficient participation to achieve outcomes.** Analyses of attendance data can identify participants who have received, or who are likely to receive, sufficient instruction to achieve their goals. When used as analytic variables, participation data can offer possible explanations for differences in participants' achievement rates and demonstrate how attendance may be related to attaining performance indicators.

- **Achieving short-term outcomes.** For many Even Start families, following through on a commitment to attend program services on a regular and consistent basis is an important first step toward achieving their long-term literacy goals. Working with families to establish attendance goals communicates the importance of regular attendance and offers an opportunity to reward and reinforce the achievement of a critical short-term outcome, that is, consistent and regular attendance.

- **Attendance rates and compliance with project attendance policies.** Many projects communicate participation requirements to families as part of the program policy and expectations for continued program participation, e.g., families are expected to attend 75% of the class hours provided in each of the four core instructional components. Individual projects should establish attendance rates that are both realistic for the families they serve and at a level that ensures enough instructional opportunity to achieve goals. Data on attendance rates let projects monitor family participation patterns and document the extent to which participants attend program services regularly and consistently.

Example: Using Program Intensity Data

Situation: *At the end of the project year, project staff members were surprised to learn that their adult participants did not meet the state performance indicator expectations, and that analyses of their outcome data showed minimal differences between adults' pre- and post-test scores. At the evaluator's request, staff carefully documented the number of hours of ESL instruction offered over the project year and the adult attendance at those classes. The data showed that the project offered about 100 class hours of ESL instruction and that adults attended classes regularly.*

Conclusion: *Although participants regularly attended their classes, most did not achieve their expected outcomes. On reviewing the U.S. Department of Education recommendations for adult education hours (see page 56), staff concluded that 100 hours of instruction a year was probably insufficient to help participants achieve their goals of increased English language proficiency. Staff members examined options for increasing the ESL class hours, such as adding more hours to the school day, increasing the number of days a week that ESL was offered, and supplementing in-class hours with distance learning.*

- **Recruiting most appropriate families for Even Start services.** Although Even Start projects are directed to serve those families "most in need," an important "lesson learned" is that not all families can or will commit to the level of participation required to achieve Even Start program outcomes. An important use of participation data is to determine whether projects have successfully recruited families who are in most need, can attend regularly, and remain in the program for a sufficient time to achieve their goals.

- **Identifying families in need of program intervention and support.** Projects that review participation data monthly or quarterly can use these data to identify families who need more support or encouragement to increase their attendance. Sharing attendance data with a family is an effective way to show the reality of its attendance patterns and can open a discussion on the relationship between consistent attendance and reaching goals.

- **Participant perceptions of program services.** Attendance data can be used as a measure of participant satisfaction with program services. It is not uncommon for participants' attendance rates to vary by component. Project staff may review attendance rates to see if they differ by component, which may suggest the need for further investigation. For example, analyses of attendance rates may reveal that participants attend ESL classes at an average rate of 80% but only attend parenting education at the rate of 50%. In this case, staff may wish to gather more data from parent surveys, program quality reviews, etc., to identify any issues with the parenting education component.

- **Monitoring post-test assessment schedules.** Many states have adopted performance indicators that include a requirement that post-testing occur after participants complete a specified number of instructional hours (e.g., adult education participants should be post-tested after completing 100 hours of adult education). Attendance data analyses can identify individuals who have completed the requisite instructional hours and are ready for post-testing.